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SUBJECT: GROWING FEARS OF AN INDECISIVE OUTCOME AS BIHAR GOES TO THE POLLS

11. (SBU) Summary: Bihar goes to the polls tomorrow, October 18, in its second set of State elections in less than nine months. Over 500 candidates made their last efforts over the past weekend to sway voters, in what all observers believe will be a close election. However, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) under the leadership of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Railway Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav, looks to be weaker coming into this election than in the February, s hung election, giving the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) of the Janata Dal (United) (JDU) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) an opportunity to pick up additional votes and tilt the balance in their favor. The lack of a clear winner is sparking growing fears that this election could be just as indecisive as the last and leave the state with a "hung parliament" yet again. End Summary

12. (U) With polling for the first phase of the State elections set to begin on October 18, over 500 candidates ended their campaigning on October 16 in Bihar, s 57 Assembly constituencies. Four (out of the total 61) constituencies in Naxalite-hit Gaya district were excluded from the first phase for security reasons. Polling in these constituencies will now take place on October 21.

13. (U) Bihar has always experienced violence during elections and recent campaigning was marred by the October 6 attack on former Union Minister and BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad while addressing a rally. One person was also arrested at a Lalu Prasad rally for carrying a revolver. Bihar Chief Secretary GS Kang assigned around 90,000 Central Para-Military Forces, Bihar military police, armed police and home guards to provide security, while Indian Air Force choppers patrolled the skies to ward off any threat from Naxalites, who put up posters in 12 districts warning villagers that they faced severe consequences if they went to the polls. The state's Chief Electoral Officer NK Sinha also specified that the Election Commission would not allow voting in booths without adequate security.

14. (U) There are over 12 million eligible voters in the State and 13,338 polling stations. The Bihar election office told media that more than 140,000 criminals were arrested in the past three months in a special drive launched at the behest of the Chief Election Commission. The police also seized over 3,000 firearms and unearthed over 100 illegal gun factories.

15. (U) Just as in the February 2005 elections, the UPA is less unified than the opposition NDA. However, this time there will be a three-way split, as Ram Vilas Paswan and his Lok Janashakti Party (LJP) has left the UPA and set up its own electoral coalition. That means that this year's election will be a triangular contest between the NDA (BJP and JD(U)), the RJD-led Secular Democratic Front (Congress, NCP) and the LJP coalition (LJP, CPI and CPI(M)).

16. (U) The first phase is most crucial for the RJD, which must demonstrate that it has sufficient momentum to win a clear victory and form the government. It must do better than it did in the February parliamentary elections, when the results were:

-RJD 23

-JD (U) 12

-BJP 4

-LJP 9

-CPI-ML 4

-Samajwadi Party 1

-Congress 1

-independents 3

17. (U) The last Assembly election was a very close contest between the RJD and the NDA in terms of votes polled.

-RJD 75 seats (25.07 per cent)

-NDA 92 seats (25.52 per cent)
-JD (U) 55 seats (14.55 per cent)
-BJP 37 seats (10.97 per cent)
-LJP 29 seats (12 per cent)
-Congress 10 seats (5 per cent)
-NCP 3 seats (0.98 per cent)
-CPI-ML 7 seats (2.49 per cent)
-CPI 3 seats (1.58 per cent)
-CPI-M 1 seat (0.64 per cent)
-Samajwadi Party 4 seats (2.69 per cent)
-BSP 2 seats (4.41 per cent)
-and independents 17 seats (16.16 per cent).

19. (SBU) Comment. Lalu, the RJD and its UPA partners seem weaker going into this election compared to February. Paswan's effort to create a third bloc appears to have had more of an impact on the RJD than the NDA in that he may have split the crucial Muslim vote. In addition, the JD(U), even given its alliance with the BJP, seems to be attracting some Muslim votes as well. Finally, the RJD is facing greater resentment after its 14 years of misrule, causing more of its once-enthusiastic constituents within the Muslim and backward caste communities to openly express a desire for change. One of the three contesting coalitions must score a decisive victory to form a stable government. With such a close three-way contest, there are growing fears that Bihar could face yet another "hung assembly" and growing instability.
BLAKE